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voices

Union Supporter

Arnold Sell, couples therapist, MarriageWorks

By Amy Mulvihill

"It always takes a crisis for couples to come. They've finally exhausted the resources within them as individuals and within the relationship and the natural support system of family and friends. [They say], 'We need to go talk to somebody.' And of course, it's the last thing anybody wants to do. Who wants to expose their lives to a total stranger?"

You start from the outside and work in. I let them know that I understand that they'd rather not be here. But you are here, so let's see if, with the time we have, something of value can come out of the experience. I am very accommodating. I'm a pretty warm guy. I'm compassionate. It's what I do. So people tend to open up.

It's usually wives bringing husbands—probably 80 percent of the time. Probably around 30 percent of patients come because of an affair. An affair is a symptom of marital problems, a symptom of this tremendous distance. It's usually the man. It used to be that a spouse would sense something and now, these days, because of cell phones and e-mail, it's coming to light. The wife will say, 'What's this number you've been calling?'

A good therapist allows himself to be affected. I have to allow myself to be affected by how they feel and what's going on between them, because, just as what they're saying and how they are is data, the effect that they have on me is data. What they evoke in me is data. It allows me to understand what it feels like inside this marriage.

The kinds of serious problems that husbands and wives have, they will have those

whoever they are married to. If someone is really submissive or timid or doesn't feel like they're entitled to anything, they're going to experience that in their next marriage, if they don't attend to it. Most people in my field feel like, whatever marriage you're in, you've got the best chance of addressing the problems in this one. If you don't address them, the issues will surface in the next one. It's why second marriages are more likely to end in divorce than first marriages.

I'm very reluctant to say it, but there have been times where I have recommended [divorce]. But it's been very, very rare. I have a bias on the side of marriage, on the side of the relationship. I'm here to engage the healthy parts of these people. If there is serious physical abuse, serious, serious emotional abuse, I would tell them to think seriously about discontinuing this relationship.

Marriage is unlike any other adult relationship. It is the only relationship where two adults—absolute strangers to one another—become family, and we relate to our family in ways that we don't relate to anyone else, even our best friends. It's like two cultures coming together. I don't care if people grew up in houses right next door to each other, same religion, both blue col-

lar or white collar, it's still two different cultures coming together to make another culture. And this is just aside from individual baggage or psychopathology. The closest thing to it is adoption.

I've had this idea about destigmatizing and normalizing this kind of care because ultimately it really is educational. It's so misrepresented. It's about seeing and understanding more fully life and oneself. I think of it in terms of making visible what's invisible. There are things going on in our lives that we cannot see that are seeable. It's like turning on a light rather than continuing to bump into a piece of furniture in a room. Turn on the light! At least see what you're doing. Then, you know, you're free to turn it out and act like you never saw it!

It's a very special, kind of wonderful relationship to have someone who shows up in your life for 50 minutes, who is there for you and has put her or his stuff back there but has brought their knowledge, history, skills and themselves to be there in service of you. I think of as, you take your car to a mechanic, the mechanic opens it up and looks at it. This is like the three of us opening up the hood and looking at what's going on.

I'll never retire: I'll cut back. I still find it intriguing. I feel very, very fortunate. It's a wonderful way to make a decent living. It's very humanizing and it feels good to do good." ■

